

Master Chief the Babysitter

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Summary: The Master Chief is shanghaied into babysitting an infant. What could possibly go wrong?

1. Chapter 1

Master Chief the Babysitter

****A/N:** This short story takes place during 'Other Worlds Than These'. For those of you who have not read it you will likely be lost as far as where this story is taking place and who some of the characters are. However, I still encourage you to read it as you do not have to be familiar with my other works to be able to enjoy it.**

****** There will be about three to four chapters roughly a thousand words long and I will update about once a week. I have had this idea for a while and given the somber tone of 'The Gyre Widens' I wanted something a little more lighthearted to work on. As always please review.**

(Space/Time Anomaly) The Calla, Mid-World

The Master Chief had plans for the day. Not big ones, but they were plans, and he was a man who liked making and executing them. With Cortana gone, her official business in town to buy supplies and more clothes that would actually fit him, her unofficial business to talk with the people who inhabited this post-apocalyptic alternate reality they had somehow found themselves in (the only good thing resulting from their arrival as far as the Chief was concerned being that Cortana was alive and now had a physical body). She was to talk to them, not to convince them to make a stand against the periodic raiders who were known as Wolves, but to gather information. Given the Spartan's silent and rather intimidating nature, even without his armor, it was no surprise that he had not joined her.

No, his plan for the day was to meet up with Roland and examine what

weapons the villagers had, some of them being guns and rifles, and see which ones, if any, could be used.

But this plan was ultimately dashed by a short, but intimidating woman. A woman on a mission, and John had spent enough time with strong women to know that it was best to get out of their way. Except there was no sidestepping Zalia Jaffords determination, for right now it was directed at him.

"Cry pardon sai," she said apologetically, though her voice was that of a commander directing his troops, and in a way John was under her command. He was after all staying in her house, and Cortana had a long talk with him about what was expected by guests. She continued, "But with all the kids out to the four corners of the Calla, my brain dead husband out in the field, and Andy nowhere in sightâ€¦" John grimaced, a slight facial expression none but Cortana would have noticed. He did not like Andy the Messenger Robot, whose other functions included babysitting the Calla children and telling horoscopes, mostly because he reminded John too much of a more primitive Guilty Spark.

John shook his head, "I'm not really qualified."

"Sai," Zalia said pleadingly. "Grandpere needs his medicine, and Rosalita is the only one in the Calla who has it. Gods and the Man Jesus know Tian wouldn't go get it himself. He'd rather just let the old coot die." John glanced over at the Grandpere, who was currently sleeping in his rocking chair, hair so grey it had turned white, and wrinkles so heavy that it looked as if his face was melting, drool hanging down from his mouth. The man looked as if he would die any day, but as John looked back at Zalia, the infant Aaron in her arms, he knew that he had only one answer to give, even if he did give it reluctantly.

"Okay."

"Thankee sai," Zalia breathed gratefully, handing the baby over to him, John taking Aaron as gently as he could. Zalia leaned over and kissed Aaron on the cheek. "Momma will be back in a little bit," she said, and then she was gone, out the door so fast that John could have easily mistaken her for Kelly. John held the baby out at arm's length, as if he was holding biohazardous material. He and the child stared at each other, green eyes conflicting with blue ones the color of faded jeans.

Then Aaron began to cry.

â€¦

John did not panic, not at first. That would come much later, but the look on his face if you had the eye to read it could only be described as bewildering uncertainty. As the child wailed, a screeching sound as annoying and ten times more painful than the frantic yelps of Grunts as they ran away from the Chief's constant onslaught of lead and death, John wracked his memory about what to do.

The child continued to cry, his face turning an interesting shade of red, dulling John's thinking as he tried to muscle his mind through the numbing sobs. At last the idea struck him. He had seen Zalia

comforting Aaron before, pulling him close to her and rubbing his back while gently rocking him. It was certainly out of John's comfort zone, but at this point he was willing to try anything to get the child to stop.

Slowly he brought the baby to him, awkwardly positioning his arms for an embrace, but just as Aaron touched John's chest he began to scream louder, so loud that John was genuinely afraid that his eardrums might burst. With practiced speed he moved the infant back to arms length, but rather than calm Aaron down the sudden movement had seemed to frighten him, his screams now reaching a pitch so high that John could swear that he heard dogs barking in the distance.

His head began to ache. He went to rub his temple, remembered that he had been holding Aaron in both arms, and like a whip his hand was back again to support him lest Aaron fall to the floor.

He looked around the living room, seeing Grandpere still slumped over in his chair, eyes half open, a fly entering and exiting his mouth with each snore, the trail of drool now reaching his shoulders. John could only look, the constant wails having now killed all thought. Thankfully his ultra perceptive eyes picked up on an object that triggered his memory. He walked over to the crib, placing Aaron down gently though not as gently as his mother would have done, and then bent over to pick up the pacifier.

It had been carved out of oak, plastic and rubber being beyond what the people of the Calla could make, such knowledge having been lost after the fall of the Old People. It was sanded down to a smooth finish, and John rubbed his thumb over it to make sure there were no splinters. Satisfied he walked over to the crib, waited for him to open his mouth for a fresh sob, then threw the pacifier in as a mason would throw mortar onto brick or stone.

Aaron's tears stopped almost immediately, the child making a cooing sound as he began to suck on his binky, his eyes already becoming heavy with sleep as his head rested on the soft mattress of the crib.

John let out a sigh. _Finally, _he thought. _Just like filling in a hole. _He turned around and began to walk away. He could not go with Roland as he had planned, but there were other things to do, like recalibrate his armor, again, or clean his pistol, again. The Master Chief, however, did not make it halfway across the room before a familiar sound stopped him dead in his tracks.

Aaron's pacifier popped out of his mouth, and he began to cry again.

2. Chapter 2

Roland shook his head as he examined the bolt action rifle, the weapon itself several centuries old at least, more likely to explode in a man's hands than actually fire. The metal, every square inch of it, was stained the brownish red color of rust, the wood faded and splintered in several places. The gunslinger attempted to pull the bolt back, hand gripping the unyielding action tightly as he threw his shoulder into the effort. His hand slipped and slammed onto the workshop table, and he muttered curses under his breath. The

gunslinger put a cigarette into his mouth and lit it, sighing out a puff of smoke as he surveyed the other rifles the people of the Calla had brought him.

The Spartan should have been there by now, and Roland wondered what was keeping him, the Master Chief not seeming to be a man that made a habit of being late. It would not make much of a difference, Roland supposed. He very much doubted that any amount of cleaning or repairs that they could do would result in any of these guns being made to work, especially when you considered the sorry state of the ammunition.

But Roland had made a promise, and the gods punished oath breaking just as surely as they punished arrogance and wastefulness, for that was one fundamental truth concerning all the known deities of the multiverse.

The gods punish.

And then there was ka to deal with.

Roland placed the cigarette back up to his lips and inhaled again, his thoughts rising to the part of his mind where his memories were kept much like the smoke which rose in spiraling columns to greet the wooden ceiling above him.

Ka, what some call fate although it is much more than that, is always working, that was one thing the gunslinger was absolutely sure of. It was by no mere chance that John and Cortana had been transported to mid-world. There was a reason why they were here, and Roland was beginning to suspect why.

There were similarities between him and John that were too great for Roland to ignore, their similar posture, personalities, hair and eye color being the least of them. The gunslinger did not study history, poetry, or philosophy although he could talk about them at length, but what he knew about the subjects was more a product of wrote learning rather than any actually understanding. As far as Roland was concerned the past was irrelevant, the future was ka, and the present took care of itself. The only thing that truly mattered was the Tower, that singular lynchpin which held an infinity of infinities together.

The appearance of the Master Chief and Cortana had forced Roland to examine his own past, much like the arrival of Eddie, Jake, and Susannah had forced him to relive it as well.

_Thirteen, _Roland thought, kicking his worn out boots into the dirt floor underneath him, stirring up angry brown clouds. _Thirteen out of fifty-six. _He frowned. No, it had been fourteen if he counted Aileen whom Cort had trained in secret. Still, only fourteen graduates in a class that had begun as fifty-six back when Roland was still just a child of six. Fourteen gunslingers to stand against the mounting insurrection. Fourteen to combat the unpredicted and much larger threat of the Covenant Man who in other worlds is known as the man in black. Fourteen to make a stubborn, but not final, stand during the Fall of Gilead, and out of that small number Roland was the only one left.

It was impossible to deny the similarities between the Spartan's

story and the gunslinger's, and as Roland continued to think his vision blurred, his body swept away by the rising undercurrent of memories.

Alain (or was it Kurt?) who could smell out almost any ambush except for when the man in black was involved, and had died at Jericho Hill from two bullet wounds in his chest.

Aileen (or was it Linda?) who was the best sniper Roland had ever seen, and had been rewarded for her devotion to him by having a spear thrust into her chest, mortally wounding her.

Cuthbert (or was it Sam?) who had been Roland's best friend since before their mandatory military training had begun, and had smiled in the face of death, blood running down his face.

The gunslinger blinked, a momentary bout of dizziness striking him hard in the face. He reached up and rubbed his eyes. Sometimes things were as clear to him as a flash of lightning, but whatever revelations he gained in such moments were gone as quickly as the rolling thunder which followed

His cigarette finished the gunslinger returned to the rifle, this time setting the butt on the table, standing the rifle straight up. With both hands he pulled down on the bolt, using his substantial strength to finally pry it loose. Placing the gun back down onto the table he wiped at a bead of sweat which had formed on his forehead.

There was something else that bothered Roland, namely his feelings towards Cortana. He was becoming increasingly certain that he was falling in love with her. He had felt such an emotion before, although it had only ever occurred once and was so long ago that he barely remembered the feeling. The idea that it was happening again worried him, for if she returned his affection it would most surely mean her death. Such was the fate of all of Roland's friends and allies. The idea that he loved her on a romantic level after only known her for a few days was not strange, at least not when you consider the forces surrounding them. Those drawn by or too Roland tended to develop strong emotional bonds both to him and to others rather quickly, almost instantly. Eddie and Susannah had fallen in love after the span of only a few hours once they had been drawn into mid-world, and Jake love Roland as a father. It was all part of ka-tet, the forces of existence breaking down emotional barriers with the force of a sledge hammer.

For Roland to develop such an attachment to Cortana meant something, and he would have acted on his desires already had it not been for John. Nearly everything about the pair suggested to Roland that they were intimate, yet something inside him told the gunslinger that they had not yet taken that step. This confused him greatly. Cortana was young, her beauty almost having an unnatural quality about it, and she was fiercely intelligent which was surpassed only by her kindness. Still, even though he knew that Cortana wanted a relationship with the Master Chief, he sensed reluctance in John.

The gunslinger was sure that ka meant for them to end up together, but still they remained apart. Still stuck in the friend zone as Eddie would have said, and so Roland had kept his distance and his

feelings to himself, something that was not hard to do.

(That's your biggest problem Roland) Eddie's voice spoke inside his mind. (You're a machine. Yeah every now and then your humanity seeps through, but in the end you're just as much of a robot as Andy is)

Roland frowned, deepening the creases on his face. Perhaps Eddie was right, that he should try to act a bit more human.

He made his decision. If John would not act soon to make Cortana his, than Roland would.

3. Chapter 3

John leaned over top of the crib, peering down at the crying infant inside with his brow furrow. Aaron, who seemed to be frightened of the Spartan's stern face pockmarked with scars, started crying louder, arms flailing and legs kicking. The Master Chief spied the fallen pacifier next to the baby's kicking legs, and picked it up, placing it back into Aaron's awaiting mouth. Just as before Aaron began to quiet down as soon as the binky hit his lips, and once again started shrieking as it fell out of his mouth.

_Maybe he was dropped, _John thought as he puzzled over the reasons as to why Aaron could not manage to do something as simple as hold onto the pacifier. He leaned over a bit more, searching Aaron's head for tell tale bald spots, then gave up. He put the binky back into the baby's mouth again, and again it fell out. On the fourth try John placed his finger on the pacifier and held it in place, insuring that this time it would not fall out. Aaron looked up dreamily at the Master Chief, perhaps supposing that the big scary giant was not so bad after all, and after several more minutes of sucking drifted off to a dreamed filled sleep.

The binky began to slip out of Aaron's mouth once John took his finger off of it, and he immediately replaced it. He stood there thinking about how he was going to make sure Aaron stayed asleep without having to stand there all day, when an idea came to him. It was a terrible idea. Cortana of course would have told him how awful the idea was if she had been there, but she was not, and there is nothing in existence more destructive than a bored Spartan left to his own devices.

As gently as he could John picked Aaron up, making sure to still hold the binky in place. He went to the kitchen to search for supplies.

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Hedda and Lia Jaffords ran into the house, dresses dirty from rolling down a grass covered hill with the rest of the children of the Calla. For them a steep hill to roll down was as exciting as things got, except of course if you counted jumping from a barn loft into a stack of hay, or telling ghost stories in the middle of the night, whispering to make sure that their parents did not find out that they had stayed up so late. Then again, since these children had no concept of television, the internet, video games, and only a vague notion of what a book was, they had no ability to miss those things.

Therefore, we can hardly consider them deprived. Entertainment, much like beauty, is often in the eyes of the beholder.

They stopped their half run, half frolicking skips, when they reached the kitchen. They stared wide eyed at John, who to them seemed as tall as the highest mountain. As tall as Lord Perth in the fairy tales their mother sometimes told them. When they had first met him while John was still in his MJOLNIR armor, Hedda's first thought was that he was like Andy the Messenger Robot, Lia that he was like a knight from the days of Arthur Eld. When John had removed his helmet and revealed that he was in fact a man, Lia had taken a great amount of pleasure in having been right, or at least the closest to the truth. Hedda leaned over to whisper something in her sister's ear, but both girls jumped when John spoke.

"I can hear you."

As the two girls' hearts pounded in surprise, John continued to rummage through the drawers of the kitchen, Aaron still asleep in his arms. Occasionally the binky would slip out and John's arm would move like a whip, catching the pacifier and putting back in the child's mouth again.

"Where's mamma?" Hedda asked, the bolder of the two.

"Out," John said simply, not looking up at them.

"Where?"

"Callahan's house."

"Why?"

"To see Rosalita."

"Why?"

"To get medicine."

"For who?"

John clenched his teeth and let the built up frustrated leak out of him before answering calmly. "For your grandfather."

"Oh," Hedda said, elongating the word as far as she could in a single breath.

"What are you doing," Lia asked, finally finding her voice.

"Looking for tape," John replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. If he could just find a role of tape, then he could make sure the pacifier never fell out again.

"What's tape?"

John closed his eyes, the vein in his temple throbbing. "Never mind," he said, closing the drawer that he was currently rummaging through. He turned around to look at the girls, who were standing there still wide eyed with their hands behind their backs. With Hedda being seven

and Lia being five, the Master Chief had more than enough common sense to know that his tour of duty babysitting Aaron was far from over.

Then Lia covered mouth and let out a word that filled John with as much dread as a rampaging horde of Flood. "Uh-oh."

John looked down at Aaron, the baby now fully awake. A look of concentration past over Aaron's brow, his cheeks turning purple, as if he was trying to contemplate the vast mysteries of the cosmos while at the same time bench pressing twice his own body weight. A putrid stench hit John with the force of an elephant, and he quickly moved to hold Aaron at arm's length.

Both Hedda and Lia were clenching their noses, and simultaneously said, "Ewwwww! Aaron!"

Frowning John attempted to hand Aaron off to one of his sisters. "One of you go change him."

Hedda took a step away. "No."

Lia, not to be outdone, took an even larger step back. "Nope."

John furrowed his eyebrows. "That's an order."

"We're not soldiers," Hedda retorted. "We don't have to do what you say."

The throbbing in his temple was growing worse, and he wondered where their new found assertiveness had come from. Not a minute ago they had been as timid as sheep around him. The smell told him the reason why. John gave them his best argument. "You'll do what I say because I'm an adult."

"My brother says you're just a cranky old man," Lia said, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Cranky cuz Cortana isn't here," Hedda chimed in. Both girls giggled at each other. Together in a singsong voice they began to chant, "Chief and Cortana sitting in a tree. KISSING! First comes love, then comes marriage, then come a baby in aâ€¦"

"Enough!" John barked, and got immense satisfaction at seeing them jump again. He waited a few moments to make sure that the girls would remain quiet. The Chief took a deep breath. "I don't know how to change a diaper. One of you has to do it."

Lia and Hedda looked at each other. "We can tell you how."

"Goodâ€¦"

"But we're still not doing it."

"Fine," John relented. Another waft of the foul odor hit him again, and the only ray of hope that the Master Chief was able to cling on to was that the day could not get worse than this.

4. Chapter 4

Aaron was smiling up at the Master Chief, no doubt delighting himself in the Spartan's increasing level of discomfort. The smell had been bad enough, but the cleanup had been far worse. I will not trouble you with the horrors that John had to face while changing the baby's diaper, which he had soon discovered was little more than a swaddling rag held together precariously by pins, for the details of that particular grotesqueness would surely cause you to lie awake at night, wondering how a kind a loving God could put such terrors on the Earth. What I will tell you is that John's last shred of dignity was saved, although only momentarily, by his fast reflexes, using the diaper to block the stream of liquid that came out like a hose once the previously covered parts of Aaron's small body was exposed to fresh air. The infant had giggled as he did this, and John responded with a deep scowl.

Using two fingers he set the dirty diaper aside, which he had efficiently tied into a tight sack, ensuring that there would be no leaks. Frowning, he turned to Lia and Hedda who had spent the whole time staring at him and providing instructions when he had asked for it. "Where can I throw this away?"

The two girls blink a few times, and a part of John's mind groaned as he realized too late what they were about to say. Hedda spoke, "You don't throw it away. You wash it."

John could almost feel that last sliver of dignity wriggling itself out of his fingers. Pre-industrial society. No disposable diapers, only plenty of reusable ones. Disgusting, yes, but that is how people did it for thousands of years. The final reserve of resolve in John's considerable force of will kicked in, and he clenched his escaping dignity in a stranglehold just as it was about to slip away. No, was the only word he thought, but the singular declaration was defiant. He picked Aaron up and handed him to Hedda. "Watch him."

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John stomped his boot down on the freshly filled in hole, the contaminated diaper a full two feet underneath the ground. Cleaning the diaper was simply more than he could bare, and so he had done the most logical thing. It would mean that the Jaffords would be one diaper short, but he was sure that he could coax Cortana into buying a new one. All he would have to do is endure another one of her lectures about how he was supposed to act in a civilized society, and he had already received plenty of those from her already.

John sighed as he placed the shovel up against the house. He was glad that she was back. More than glad, he was elated, even though he would have never used the term himself, but things had grown complicated between them. John had no way to categorize the feelings he had for her, no adequate vocabulary to draw upon. He was vaguely aware of the concept of love, and unbeknownst to him he had actually felt the emotion before towards his fellow Spartans as well as a few select others in the UNSC, but the idea of romantic love was far beyond his ability to comprehend. He cared about her deeply, he knew that much, for more deeply than he had for anyone else, even Kelly, which up until recently had been the most significant woman in his life next to Halsey, and he knew Cortana felt the same way.

The question was where to go from here. The option of some type of relationship beyond the bounds of friendship had crossed his mind. They were already sleeping in the same bed together in any case, and he was surprised at how much he enjoyed being that physically close to her on a regular basis. What he did not know was what that kind of relationship would consist of, or more specifically what they would be doing differently. Sex? Well maybe. That particular bridge was still several leagues away, and the mechanisms of that was an even greater mystery to him, the knowledge lost in some distant memory of one of Dã©jã's biology classes. The answer had come to him the previous night.

Cortana had kissed him.

John pushed the thought away as he reentered the house. He did not want to relive that particular disaster just now. Did not want to let the regret resurface.

The beaming smile of Lia met him, and with hands like a cobra she grabbed John's oversized hands with two of her small ones, pulling at his fingers. "Tea party," she said, and began pulling on him. "We already have everything set up, and we want you to play with us." Her feet began to dig into the floor, and Lia threw John's hand over her shoulder, tugging on his arm like a piece of rope, the Spartan remaining motionless. "Come on!" she whined.

John grunted and allowed himself to be led by the small five year old into the kitchen. What he really wanted right now was coffee, but tea would do, could possibly relieve him of his increasingly unbearable headache that was threatening to melt his brain into hot liquid goo. As he was being led he saw Aaron laying happily in his crib. As John passed him he could have sworn that he saw the baby close his right eye then open it again quickly, winking at him. He quickly dismissed it a trick of the light, or something else along those lines.

The tea set was arranged on the kitchen table where Hedda already sat, two of the seats vacant, and the rest occupied by an assortment of dolls, their hair frayed and their smiles hideously exuberant. The cups were made of cracked orange clay, and John saw to his dismay that as Hedda poured out the contents of the tea kettle that no tea was actually coming out of it, only empty air. It was all make believe, but before John could change his mind about joining the party, Lia maneuvered him to a chair and sat him down with the level of authority that only a five year old can wield.

Zalia will be coming back soon, John thought. _Any minute now.

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"Our guest is here," Lia said happily, scrambling up into her own seat.

"Good," Hedda said, pouring air into John's cup and setting the kettle down. It was then that John noticed three crowns sitting on the table. They had been skillfully crafted from yellow dandelions, clover, sowthistle, and a weed that looked similar to Canada thistle, forming crowns of green, yellow, and purple.

_No, _John thought. _No, no, no, no. _

She reached for the first crown and placed it on her head. "Princess Hedda." She placed the second crown on her sister's head. "Princess Lia." Hedda picked up the last crown and handed it over towards John. "And Princess Chief!"

John stared at the crown for several moments, the dignity he had so valiantly tried to maintain now all but gone. "I'm not wearing that," he said flatly.

"Yes you will," Hedda said, holding it out to him further.

John's cold blue eyes looked directly into hers. "No."

Hedda placed the crown on the table and put her hands on her hips, her face filling with singular determination that her vision for the crowning of Princess Chief would be realized. "Yes You Will."

5. Chapter 5

_ He was a nightmare. Pulled from the depths of humanities primal fear of the black waters in the great sea that is Unknown. _

_ He existed in the shadows. He was the shadows. Not running from the light, but bending it to his will to create his own darkness._

_ He was Legion. A demon and a dark god. A wizard and a sorcerer, standing in defiance of all that is logic and reasoning, and he was smiling at her._

_ The man in black always smiled at Cortana, as if there was some terrible secret that he knew about her, one that could shake the pillars of her reality. He stood there in the mist that surrounded them, the grey fog twirling around them in miniature vortexes, appearing as he always did to her as a man in a black robe, the hood covering his eyes, and thank the gods and the Man Jesus for that. Cortana did not want to look into those eyes, those deep pools of madness that would surely send her tumbling back into Rampancy. Would shatter any sense of sanity she had left. _

_ "This is a dream," Cortana said, even as the coldness crept along her skin._

_ The dark man shrugged. "Perhaps, but it is far safer to assume a dream is not a dream until you wake up. Wouldn't you agree?"_

_ Cortana said nothing, and as the Covenant Man stepped closer to her she stood her ground. The man in black tilted his head as if amused. "You didn't really think he cared about you?" _

_ "He does," Cortana said quietly, but as always the dark man was successful in planting seeds of doubt in her mind._

_ He smiled viciously. "He left you on High Charity."_

_ "I asked him too."_

_ The man in black nodded. "But I do not recall him begging for you to go with him. I do not recall him placing your safety above everything else, for the UNSC has always been what is most important

to him has it not?"_

_ Cortana held her head up, determined to not let his words affect her. "He came back."_

_ "For the index," the man in black corrected. "Not for you. You were always just a tool for him to use. To be cast aside once it has outlived its usefulness." _

_ "You don't know him," Cortana said defiantly. "He stood up for me on Infinity. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. He has always believed in me."_

_ "Has he?" The dark man tutted, the sound stabbing at Cortana's ears. "Perhaps you are not as intelligent as I have been led to believe. Consider this thought. Suppose the only reason saved you from deactivation at the hands of Del Rio is because he knew his chances were greater against the Didact if you were still at his disposal. A weapon to be wielded and then sacrificed for the good of humanity." He laughed mildly. "And he did sacrifice you." He held up a finger before Cortana could speak. "He knew that you would give your own life to save his. John manipulated you Cortana. If anything you are just a nuisance to him."_

_ "Shut up," Cortana nearly shouted, her fists clenched and her cheeks flushed blood red._

_ The dark man stopped his steady march towards her, but his look of supreme confidence never wavered. "I am merely saying what you fear." He waved his hand and the mist around them swirled together into one mass, the clouds twisting and turning to form a mirror. The mist that made up the mirror opened like a curtain, and beyond its translucent surface Cortana saw an image that stung her. She turned her head to look away, but the dark man waved his hand again, and Cortana was forced to look at it once more._

_ There was she and John, sleeping in the same bed, but their backs to each other, both as far away from the other as they could be. "What did you expect to happen when you kissed him? That he would return the display of affection and pledge his undying love to you? That both of you after your grand adventures would retire to a happily ever after? Mayhap even start a family."_

_ Cortana's lip quivered as she continued to look at the image, mostly because everything the dark man was saying was true. It had felt so right, the timing seeming to be perfect when she had gently leaned over him and pressed her lips to his. Cortana had thrown everything she had into that kiss, and John did not return it. The awkward silence that had followed had been unbearable._

_ She bit her lip and the quivering halted. "Why are you doing this?"_

_ "The same reason I am doing everything else." The man in black looked up at the sky, gazing at the heavenly lights above him. "Cortana what do you see?"_

_ Without bothering to look up as well Cortana answered. "Stars."_

_ "Stars," the dark man said, his voice coming dangerously close to

wonder. "The Forerunners built weapons that could destroy life on a galactic scale, but I say they were not ambitious enough."_

_ "Of course. You fancy yourself as some sort of antichrist."_

_ "Antichrist?" The dark man shook his head. "Call me Anticreation." He continued to look up at the stars, as if in the process of counting them all. "The thrill of a thousand worlds dying at once." He look back at her, and for the briefest of moments Cortana caught the black reflection of his eyes in the starlight. "But my ultimate goal lies beyond the downfall."_

_ The mist began to swirl around them again, and Cortana was plunged into the nothingness between dreams and consciousness. _

6. Chapter 6

Susannah Dean of 1964 looked over at her friend, Cortana slowly sipping on a glass of water and she sat in a rocking chair on the front porch of Took's Store, and staring out at seemingly nothing. In her defense there was not much to look at, the dusty streets of the Calla proper like something out of a wild west movie, and Susannah half expected to see Clint Eastwood or John Wayne to come riding in at any moment. Then again Roland did look remarkably like Clint Eastwood, and the Master Chief's real name was John in any case.

The young black woman shook her head. It was easy to be sidetracked by such thoughts. Everything in mid-world seemed like it should belong in a movie or a book (and if Susannah had been born a few decades later, she would have also said video games). It was all just a littleâ€|

"Cortana you alright. You're acting a bit odd."

Cortana blinked several times as if coming out of a trance and smiled. "Sorry. Just daydreaming."

Beside Susannah, Eddie Dean of 1987 chuckled. "Bet I can guess what it was about."

Susannah turned and frowned at Eddie. "Be nice."

Eddie shrugged. "I think it's quite obvious that Cortana is absolutely nuts about me." He held up a hand to Susannah as her frowned deepened, shallow creases along her forehead beginning to form. "I know that it's not her fault Suze, but it's not mine either. I can't help it if I'm completely irresistible to other women. You are just going to have to get use to the competition."

"Competition," Susannah said thoughtfully. "The way I remember it you didn't have that much competition when we first met either."

"There was Roland."

"Roland is not exactly the kind of man a woman can fall for." Susannah looked back at Cortana and winked. "But then again neither is the Chief. They both are the biggest sticks in the mud I've ever seen."

"He is," Cortana admitted. "But he makes up for it in other ways."

"Sure," Eddie agreed. "If I could lift a school bus up over my head I'm sure that would make up for the few flaws that I had."

"A few?" Susannah asked rhetorically. "Since we are on the subject on when we first met, I do recall you calling me a nigger within the first five minutes of us meeting."

Eddie coughed as if a fly had just flown down his throat. "Well, ummm." He fumbled for his words as Susannah looked at him expectantly. "I wasn't calling you that. I was just talking about them in general."

"Them?"

"The, uhh, word in general." Eddie's expression quickly turned from startled to indignant and he pointed a finger at Susannah. "And the way I remember it going down is that you called me and Roland honkey motherfuckers within the first five seconds of meeting us."

Susannah's smile brightened, and it was enough to disarm Eddie completely. "Well you are honkey motherfuckers." She laughed and leaned forward to kiss him, saying just before their lips met, "But you're my honey motherfucker."

"They get like that." Cortana turned around, and looked down at what was essentially, in her mind at least, a twelve year old blonde haired version of the Master Chief.

John "Jake" Chambers of 1977 opened one blue eye at her, his hands resting comfortably behind his head as he leaned back in the chair. "What were you daydreaming about?"

Cortana could not help but smile at Jake, her lips curving into that familiar smirk that the Master Chief knew so well. "Just about a dream I had last night."

Jake's other eye opened. "Another dream?"

Cortana nodded. "It was about Walter."

She could almost hear rubber tires screeching to a halt as Eddie and Susannah stopped their public display of affection at the mention of one of the dark man's many names. It was Eddie who spoke, "You had a dream about Jeepers Creepers?"

"It's nothing," Cortana said. "He's just taken a particular interest in tormenting me. Nothing I haven't experienced before."

"The Gravemind?" Jake asked, and Cortana looked at him critically.

"How do you know about the Gravemind?"

Instead of giving her an answer, Jake's eyes became unfocused and Cortana felt a brief but intense surge of what felt like cold mercury

entering and then leaving her mind. Cortana's vision blurred and she rubbed her temple. _So that's what that feels like. How on Earth did John put up with me in his head?_ When her vision refocused she saw that Jake was looking at her guiltily.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to pry but you had a nightmare about that thing a while back and it sort of spilled out into here." He pointed at his temple.

"It's alright," Cortana said. Jake was at his core a sweet kid, and Cortana felt an incredible amount of protectiveness towards him. The only thing that truly reminded her of just how deadly Jake could be was the pistol strapped to a holster around his waist, one that she had seen him use with amazing accuracy and speed.

"What did the man in black say to you?" the boy asked.

"Just the usual megalomaniac drivel. About how all my dreams or hopeless and how much he wants to destroy all existence and that he is going to crush me like a bug."

"You know he's not such a bad guy once you get to know him," Eddie said. "Sure he's a psychopathic genocidal spawn of Satan who lies through his teeth every other time he opens his mouth, but who exactly am I to judge? He probably just had a rough childhood. Cortana, I'm sure all he really needs is a hug, and if you're willing to take one for the teamâ€¦"

"I'm not," Cortana said, trying to contain a chuckle. "So don't even ask." She turned back to Jake, only to see that the boy's eyes had become unfocused again, his pupil expanding and contracting rapidly. "What is it?" she asked, worried.

Jake blinked several times, and to Cortana's surprise a small smile formed on his lips. "I think the Master Chief is in trouble." With some concentration he sent Cortana an image, her shoulders shuddering as the cold mercury filled her again.

She stared at the image inside her mind for a few moments, almost not believing what she was seeing. "Oh boy," she said, standing up. "Sorry to have to leave, but I need to go rescue by Spartan."

End
file.